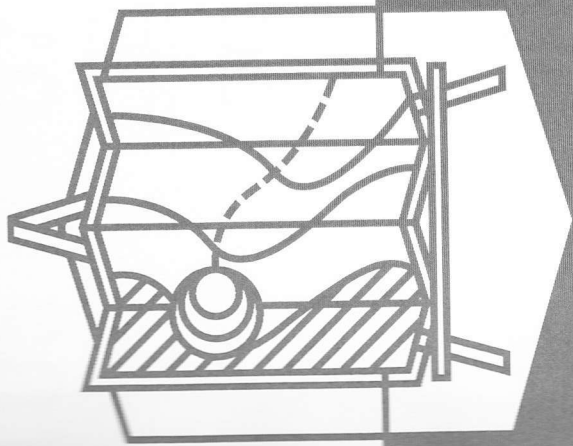


A 9-SESSION STUDY
FOR DIALOGUE IN
COMMUNITY AROUND
THE SCRIPTURES



UNFOLDING THE GREAT COMMISSION

First Principles from Acts

BY JEFF REED

PREFACE—A MODERN DAY CATECHISM

The first part of *The First Principles Series* was produced over a decade ago, and they are now being used in training over 400,000 leaders worldwide. They are being effectively used in non-literate as well as highly educated church settings. How is that possible? The reason! The series centers on the use of dialogue, the primary method used by Jesus and Paul in developing leaders in the first century. When used by properly trained leaders, the dialogue process can be transformational with non-literates as well as doctoral students and with the churches they are shepherding.

Imagine a group of believers in a small, rural local church that is 70% non-literate, 20% with about a 6th standard education, and only 10% with a Bible-college level education. They gather around a First Principles booklet. The literate reads the passages, tells background information and the storyline if needed, and then they all discuss the passage together. First, what does it mean? Then, what does it mean to us? in our village? in our community? in our families? Then imagine a small house church in a highly educated Western setting, steeped in denominational tradition, trying to get back to “the way of Christ and His Apostles.” This educational process—dialogue in community—has been around for centuries and is key to establishing believers and churches in the faith in every generation and in every culture.

Today, most Western materials are devoid of methods that create serious dialogue in community. Instead, these materials employ a simple, individualistic approach of either fill-in-the-blanks or have large amounts of academic (and inductive) Bible knowledge with individualistic “personal applications” as the goal. New believers in the Global South often move easily and quickly into our process, while those schooled in the West struggle to begin to think together in community, having to shed their individualistic personal insight approach. (Many times the oral learners are better thinkers!) And often missionaries, used to spoon feeding the illiterate, struggle the most in entering into true dialogue in community with the national brethren.

Christianity is shifting to the Global South as we enter the 21st century. Western Christendom is dying, and we find ourselves again in a time like the apostolic age of the Early Church. It is our prayer that this resource, a modern day *didache* (a catechetical tool of the Early Church), will be used by the Spirit of God to train millions of leaders worldwide who will then be able to establish their churches and believers in the teaching of Christ, as delivered to His Apostles. In the West, our prayer is that this series will help raise up a whole new generation of church planters and Antioch type churches to pioneer vibrant, spontaneously-expanding church multiplication movements.

It is toward this end, and with an awareness of these changing times, that we dedicate this series.

Jeff Reed,

October 2014

UNFOLDING THE GREAT COMMISSION—INTRODUCTION

The unfolding of the Great Commission is profoundly misunderstood in the Western discipleship model. The concept of a worldwide multiplication of churches has been reduced to a worldwide multiplication of individuals. Our Western individualism has reduced the formation of true Christian communities to the multiplication of individual disciples. Fellowships of churches have been replaced by fellowships of individuals and small groups driven by organizational purposes and agendas. The church is often reduced to a place we attend rather than our base of ministry and enterprise. The book of Acts was designed to shape our understanding of the Great Commission and how God designed it to unfold. It lays the foundation in such a way that we can build upon it solidly, according to God's design. This is often in tension at key points with the Western organizational enterprise—that is, the West's attempt to use a large organization to accomplish the global mission. To fully understand the unfolding of the Great Commission, we must understand the books of Acts. To accurately understand the book of Acts, we must understand how to discover the author's intended meaning of the biblical book or passage we are studying. This booklet is part of a series designed to lay the foundation for becoming skillful in handling the Word of God as a whole and at the same time deepening our understanding of the first principles of the faith.

Unfolding the Great Commission is book two of the third series of *The First Principles Series*. In book one of this third series we focused on learning to handle the Word with confidence. In books two through five we will practice what we learned in book one. We will study Acts for building an overall framework of what really happened in the Early Church followed by three booklets designed to study an early, middle, and later letter of Paul. We will seek to accomplish two purposes in each of these last four books. First, we will practice the principles of interpretation that we learned. Second, we will revisit many of the passages that we studied in the first eight books of *The First Principles Series*, only in the context of the entire books in which they appear. In this sense, we will revisit and strengthen our understanding of the first principles, filling out our understanding more fully as we reflect on a few key letters.

In this book, *Unfolding the Great Commission*, we will begin in session one by examining Luke's intent for writing the book of Acts. Then in sessions two through seven we will take the six sections or books of Acts, as some call them, and carefully look at what Luke marks out as the keys to the Great Commission unfolding in the first generation. Then, in

session eight we will attempt to summarize the essence of the Great Commission so that we can be at the heart of its unfolding today, just as the early churches were. Finally, in session nine we will be challenged to respond personally to shaping our lives around the call of the Great Commission.

As we mentioned in the introduction to *Handling the Word with Confidence*, the logic of the entire series now fully comes into focus. We know the concept of the *first principles* exists (Colossians 2:6–8; Hebrews 5:11–14). Yet nowhere does Paul, nor any of the Apostles, list the first principles for us. The principles are embodied in real letters written to real churches. There is a clear deposit of teaching, but it is expected that each church, each family, and eventually, each believer studies the letters to discover these principles on their own. The core of the teaching is in Paul's letters, and the catechetical historical context is in Luke and Acts. The other epistles reinforce and enhance the teaching, and the other gospels (Matthew, Mark, and John) give fuller revelation and context for the person and work (the story) of Christ while on earth.

In the first eight booklets (Series 1 and 2), we guided you through key passages. In these last five booklets (Series 3), we will take you through a process of learning to study entire letters and groups of letters, which will make your summary of the first principles more complete. When you finish the third series you will be encouraged to write a one- or two-page draft of the first principles of the faith. You can improve on your summary for several years as you continue to study all of the letters and all of the New Testament. Your understanding of the first principles will become clearer and clearer as you progress in your study, so you can sharpen your provisional summary.

Some people ask when they begin the series, “Why not just list the first principles for us? How many are there, by the way?” We know they exist, yet they need to be drawn out of the letters and summarized in our own words. They need to be processed throughout our minds and lives and clearer and clearer articulations of them attempted throughout our lives and passed on to successive generations. This entire series is devoted to helping you develop a solid, basic understanding of the first principles of the faith, which you can confidently build upon throughout your life. It will also prepare you for an extensive series designed to follow *The First Principles* entitled *Mastering the Scriptures*.

We must develop a personal confidence in handling the Word if we expect to be effective in training our children, ministering in the church community, defending and sharing our faith in a postmodern culture, and intelligently and creatively carrying out our lifework before the watching world. In short, a weak and anemic understanding of the Word will thwart almost all our efforts to make a significant impact for Jesus Christ in our generation. This series will prepare you for a lifetime of study as you seek to master the Scriptures. So approach your study and personal reflection with great diligence.

THE FIRST PRINCIPLES SERIES

Becoming Established in Our Faith

It is absolutely critical that we become established in our faith. If we do not, all sorts of strange teaching will fill our new faith with ideas that are far more compatible with our culture or previous religion, rather than with the true Christian faith. The world is full of people Satan can use to upset whole families and churches with “another gospel.”

Paul spent significant amounts of time making sure that his churches were established in the faith. He visited them, sent team members, and sent letters to strengthen and stabilize the churches. These letters became the heart of the New Testament. He appointed leaders in the churches to see that the new churches stayed true to the teaching of Christ, which he and the other Apostles received from Christ. He also had the goal that every man would become mature in Christ (Colossians 1:29). To this end he labored and spent his life.

We cannot expect to become mature in Christ unless we are established in the faith. But most of us do not know what that means or how to know if we are solidly established in the faith. We were not taken through an orderly (catechetical) training process when we became Christians (Luke 1:1–4).

The First Principles Series is designed to be just such a process. Once you go through *The First Principles Series*, if you do it in a serious and diligent way, you will be solidly established in the faith, in the same process the Apostles used to establish the first century church and Christians. And you will have a foundation in your life that will serve you for a lifetime.

DESIGN OF THE FIRST PRINCIPLES

Series I-III

This booklet is part of a set of five booklets that make up Series III. The whole collection, Series I-III, totals thirteen booklets. They are all built around an idea found in Paul's letter to the church at Colossae, written almost 2000 years ago.

See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deception, according to the tradition of men, according to the elementary principles of the world, rather than according to Christ. (Colossians 2:8)

The phrase *the elementary principles* is best translated "the first principles." They are the fundamentals of the faith. They represent the first things that must be learned, upon which everything else is built. If they are not carefully understood, everything else will be distorted. The writer of the letter to the Hebrews understood this when he exhorted the Hebrew Christians who were forgetting their newfound faith in Hebrews 5:

11) Concerning him we have much to say, and it is hard to explain, since you have become dull of hearing. 12) For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you have need again for someone to teach you the elementary principles of the oracles of God, and you have come to need milk and not solid food. 13) For everyone who partakes only of milk is not accustomed to the word of righteousness, for he is a babe. 14) But solid food is for the mature, who because of practice have their senses trained to discern good and evil.

The Hebrew Christians forgot the first principles of their faith. Once they became Christians their Jewish family members and friends put tremendous pressure on them to return to Judaism and began challenging the basics of the Christian faith. It is clear from this passage that it is impossible to move on toward maturity without carefully understanding the first principles.

This series of booklets is designed to lead you through the first principles so you can build upon them and grow on toward maturity. In every generation of churches since the time of the New Testament, believers were expected to learn these first principles. In the Early Church, before new believers were accepted into the church, they needed to learn *the didache* ("the teaching"). A document called "The Didache" was a summary of the basic teaching of the New Testament—the first principles. During the Reformation (1500's), this teaching was called *catechism*, again designed to help Christians master the first principles.

Actually, the concept of first principles is important in every area of life. It is central to all quality education. Almost 150 years ago, in the classic work *The Idea of the University*, John Newman referred to a concept he called "pushing up the first principles." According to Newman, the purpose of a university is to teach the first principles of every discipline and then to explore the full limits of those first principles—pushing the principles up through all levels of research.

So it is with our Christian faith. Once we have mastered the first principles, we are able to push them up through all areas of our lives. That is, we are ready to move on to maturity. The *First Principles Series* is carefully designed to help you lay the foundation of your faith.

Whether you are a new believer, a believer who needs to have these first principles laid carefully for the first time, or for whatever reason, you need to have them laid afresh, do your work carefully and you will reap a lifetime of benefits.

The First Principles

Series I

1. Becoming a Disciple
First Principles of the Faith

2. Belonging to a Family of Families
First Principles of Community Life

3. Participating in the Mission of the Church
First Principles of Community Purpose

4. Cultivating Habits of the Heart
First Principles of Disciplined Living

Series II

1. Enjoying Your Relationship
First Principles of Marriage

2. Passing on Your Beliefs
First Principles of Family Life

3. Envisioning Fruitful LifeWork
First Principles of Ministry

4. Building for Future Generations
First Principles of True Success

Series III

1. Handling the Word with Confidence
First Principles of Bible Study

2. Unfolding the Great Commission
First Principles from Acts

3. Laying Solid Foundations in the Gospel
First Principles from 1 & 2 Thessalonians

4. Catching God's Vision for the Church
First Principles from Ephesians

5. Living in God's Household
First Principles from the Pastorals

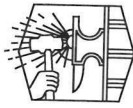
of a passage or verse in the Bible. We must apply it to our lives. Applications should be specific and related to the core truths of the passages studied.

Your work in this step:

- Think back through the first three steps.
- Design an application for your life.

The Sixth Week:

The last session in each study guide is the final step (the ninth week in this booklet).



Reshaping Our Lives

This step brings together the entire study process. In each of the first five weeks (first eight weeks in this booklet) we moved through the 4-step Consistent Study Process (CSP). Now in the sixth week (ninth week of this booklet), we will pull together all of our work and evaluate our lives.

Too often today, we stop short of what is necessary to really change our lives. Thinking through simple applications is very important as we study the Bible, but thinking through our whole lives in light of these new truths is essential. The final step in the study process requires that we rethink our entire lives in light of the truths we have been studying—that we rearrange our worldview. We must allow the truths to reshape every aspect of our lives.

Your work in this step:

- Commit your heart—by reflection, personal journaling, and prayer.
- Commit your mind—by forming clear convictions and memorizing Scripture.
- Commit your life—by decisions, personal projects, and life habits.

Two Final Parts of the Study Guides:

Each study booklet contains two additional parts—a glossary and a lifelong learning section.

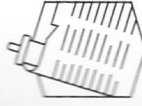
Glossary of Key Biblical Terms and Concepts—The glossary is designed to help you with important terms that you may have encountered for the first time in your study. They are kept to a minimum in the guides, but it is not possible or preferable to remove all terms with special meaning. New terms—especially biblical terms full of rich truths—just have to be learned. To make this process easier, we have included a glossary.

Lifelong Learning—This final section introduces you to additional resources that you may want to pursue. After completing a study guide, it is crucial that you do not view yourself as finished. You must understand that you are laying foundations for a lifetime of learning. Several resources are recommended for your further development.

ACTS: UNFOLDING THE GREAT COMMISSION 1

As we approach the book of Acts, or any book of the Bible for that matter, it is critical that we first seek to understand what the author intended to say. We need to discern Luke's intended meaning before seeking to understand the significance of the book for our own lives and ministries. In this session we will use the methods learned in *Handling the Word with Confidence* to summarize Luke's intention for writing the book of Acts. We will then attempt to understand how Luke put the book together—what its parts are and how they fit together. In this case, Luke chose a narrative (story) form of literature. We must find the storyline—the narrative structure—to understand how to draw principles and guidelines from it.

Luke wrote this story in two volumes. Volume one is the Gospel of Luke and volume two is the book of Acts. Therefore, we will begin by looking at passages at the beginning of each volume to attempt to discern Luke's intention for writing Acts as part two of this two-volume history. Then, we will look at a series of literary markers that tell us about the structure of volume two of this story. As you work through the whole book, section by section in the coming sessions, you will improve your understanding of Luke's intention in writing Acts, but you must make a first guess at this point. These passages will help you get a good start.



Study the Scriptures

READ THE PASSAGES: LUKE 1:1–4; 24:44–49;

ACTS 1:1–8; 6:7; 9:31; 12:24; 16:5; 19:20; 28:30–31

Think Through the Questions:

1. What was Luke's intent in writing his two-volume history? In what way is Acts a continuation of what he wrote in Luke?
2. Why do you think Luke stated that he carefully investigated everything, even the order of events, yet he gave us such a selected history in Acts—only telling us a few key events?
3. How does Acts 1:8 provide an outline for the structure of the book of Acts? How does this build off of the Great Commission in Luke 24:44–49?
4. Why do you think Luke threw in summary statements throughout the book? What clue was he trying to give us?

Summarize the Author's Intention of the Book:

Summarize Luke's intention in writing the book of Acts. Begin with a general intention statement—a long sentence—followed by six “by statements.” Each section finishes with a summary verse, which Luke used to mark each new section. Unless you have time to read the whole letter right now, you may want to wait to fill out the “by statement” for each section of Acts until you read that section in each of the future sessions of this booklet.

Author's Intention Statement for Acts:

To _____

by _____

_____ (by Acts 1:1–6:7)

by _____

_____ (by Acts 6:8–9:31)

by _____

_____ (by Acts 9:32:1–12:24)

by _____

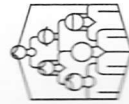
_____ (by Acts 12:25–16:5)

by _____

_____ (by Acts 16:6–19:20)

by _____

_____ (by Acts 19:21–28:31)



Consult the Scholars

The following comments are designed to help you better understand the passage and to stimulate your thinking on the implications of the teaching.

Read and Reflect on this Brief Commentary on Luke 1:1–4; 24:44–49; Acts 1:1–8; 6:7; 9:31; 12:24; 16:5; 19:20; 28:30–31:

There are four key passages that shape our understanding of Luke's intent for writing the book. They also give us clues about how he unfolded his intent. These are the four key passages, in order:

Let's look at these four passages and attempt to reconstruct, from Luke's own narratives, his intent in writing these two volumes of Early Church history. We will first note the unity of these passages and then look at each one individually.

There is a very clear continuity within these passages. Acts 1:1 continues the introduction that Luke started in Luke 1:1-4. In the Acts passage, Luke refers to the first account, which is obviously Luke's gospel. And he addresses the same person—Theophilus. So Acts clearly is the second volume of Luke's history. The second thing to notice is the phrase "about all that Jesus began to do and teach." It very directly implies that this second volume is what Jesus continued to do and teach. Some make the mistake of saying that the Gospel of Luke (volume 1) is more important than the book of Acts (volume 2) because volume one is directly Jesus' teaching while volume 2 is the teaching of Paul. This is not the case at all. Volume 2, Acts, is what Jesus continued to do and teach. Also observe the continuity between Luke 24:44-49 and Acts 1:1-8. In Luke 24:46-48 Jesus tells them that they are witnesses and that their witness will begin in Jerusalem and go to all the earth. They are instructed to wait for the Spirit in Jerusalem. In essence, He commissioned them, telling them that He would send them forth to all the nations. In Acts 1:8 Luke picks up the scene where Jesus left off in Luke 24. Here the commission begins to unfold, only now the unfolding of that witness to the nations gets more specific—it will unfold from Jerusalem, to Judea-Samaria, and then to the remotest parts of the world. Thus, the two books are structured around the unfolding of this commission to the disciples: to take the message of Christ to the nations. Luke leads up to the death and resurrection of Christ, and Acts unfolds the witness of the death and resurrection of Christ to the world. So, the salvation history of the *Great Commission*, as it is called, is the structure of these books.

Now, why did Luke actually write these books? In Luke 1:1-4 he states that it is so Theophilus would have an accurate eyewitness account of the things he had been taught. The Greek word for *taught* is where we get the word "catechism." Theophilus had been taught the teaching of Christ. This teaching of Jesus was delivered to the churches by the Apostles, especially Paul. It is referred to as authoritatively "handed down" (see Luke 1:3) by the Apostles and was to be learned by the churches. Therefore, Theophilus was taught "the teaching." Luke carefully wrote a two-volume history so that the teaching would be exactly understood and verified. Thus, what is written is the framework of the teaching and puts the teaching in the context of Christ's plan. The framework is part of the teaching and makes it all clear and exact. It makes the teaching more precise

and understandable. It is inseparable from the teaching. The teaching, delivered by the Apostles both orally and by letters, is all wrapped up in one package into what Roland Allen referred to, in personal conversation, as "the way of Christ and His Apostles." Luke's accounts, then, are not just a history of the Early Church, but rather a narrative of very carefully selected events that are intended to be catechetical in nature.

Only in this two-volume context can we sharpen our understanding of Luke's intent for his second volume—Acts. In Acts 1:8 we see the major structure of Acts—Luke's narrative of the progress of the witness of the Apostles. It progresses from Jerusalem, to Judea/Samaria, and then to the ends of the earth. So goes the story of Acts, and the structure of the narrative unfolds. It then finishes rather abruptly and is open-ended, I might add, as the witness reaches the core of the empire, which essentially extended to "the ends of the earth."

So the progress of the gospel and the establishment of the church, which is the heart of Christ's plan (birthed in Acts 1 and 2), is traced from Jerusalem, to Judea/Samaria, and then to the ends of the earth. In addition, six times along the way, Luke uses literary markers to comment briefly on the progress of the gospel: 6:7; 9:31; 12:24; 16:5; 19:20; and 28:30-31. This is intended to be all that we need to fully understand the plan of Christ, which encases and is woven together with the teaching that the Christians received. Thus, the essentials of Christ's plan, when woven with the teaching, gave them the keys to the successful establishment and expansion of the Early Church. It is this foundational plan and teaching, woven together, that we are to build our ministries upon for all subsequent generations.

Read and Reflect on Key Quotes:

The following quote is taken from "Acts—The Problem of Historical Precedent" by Gordon Fee.

"Let us begin our quest of *what* by noting the natural divisions as Luke himself gives them to us. Acts has frequently been divided on the basis of Luke's interest in Peter (chapters 1-12) and Paul (13-28), or in the geographical expansion of the Gospel (1-7, Jerusalem; 8-10, Samaria and Judea; 11-28, to the ends of the earth). Although both of these divisions are recognizable in terms of actual content, there is another clue, given by Luke himself, that seems to tie everything together much better. As you read, notice the brief summary statements in 6:7, 9:31, 12:24, 16:5, and 19:20. In each case the narrative seems to pause for a moment before it takes off in a new direction of some kind. On the basis of this clue, Acts can be seen to be composed of six sections, or panels, which give the narrative a continually forward movement from its Jewish setting based in Jerusalem with Peter as its leading figure toward a predominantly Gentile church, with Paul as the leading figure, and with Rome, the capital of the Gentile world, as the goal. Once Paul reaches Rome, where he once again turns to the Gentiles because they will listen (28:28), the narrative comes to an end.

"You should notice, then, as you read how each section contributes to this 'movement.' In your own words, try to describe each panel, both as to its content and its contribution to the forward movement. What seems to be the key to each new forward thrust? Here is our own attempt to do this:

"1:1–6:7. A description of the primitive church in Jerusalem, its early preaching, its common life, its spread and its initial opposition. Notice how Jewish everything is, including the sermons, the opposition, and the fact that the early believers continue associations with the temple and the synagogues. The panel concludes with a narrative indicating that a division had begun between Greek-speaking and Aramaic-speaking believers.

"6:8–9:31. A description of the first geographical expansion, carried out by the 'Hellenists' (Greek-speaking Jewish Christians) to diaspora Jews or 'nearly Jews' (Samaritans and a proselyte). Luke also includes the conversion of Paul, who was (1) a Hellenist, (2) a Jewish opponent, and (3) the one who was to lead the specifically Gentile expansion. Stephen's martyrdom is the key to this initial expansion.

"9:32–12:24. A description of the first expansion to the Gentiles. The key is the conversion of Cornelius, whose story is told twice. The significance of Cornelius is that his conversion was a direct act from God, who did not now use the Hellenists, in which case it would have been suspect, but Peter, the acknowledged leader of the Jewish-Christian missions. Also included is the story of the church in Antioch, where Gentile conversion is now carried out by the Hellenists in a purposeful way.

"12:25–16:5. A description of the first geographical expansion into the Gentile world, now into Europe. Repeatedly the Jews reject and the Gentiles welcome the Gospel.

"16:6–19:20. A description of the further, ever westward, expansion into the Gentile world, now into Europe. Repeatedly the Jews reject and the Gentiles welcome the Gospel.

"19:21–28:30. A description of the events that move Paul and the Gospel on to Rome, with a great deal of interest in Paul's trials, in which three times he is declared innocent of any wrongdoing.

"Try reading Acts with this outline, this sense of 'movement' in view, to see for yourself whether this seems to capture what is going on. As you read you will notice that our description of the content omits one crucial factor—indeed the crucial factor—namely, the role of the Holy Spirit in all of this. You will notice as you read that at every key juncture, in every key person, the Holy Spirit plays the absolutely leading role. According to Luke, all of this forward movement did not happen by man's design; it happened because God willed it and the Holy Spirit carried it out.

Luke's Purpose

We must be careful that we do not move too glibly from this overview of what Luke did to an easy or dogmatic expression of what his inspired purpose in all of this was. But a few observations are in order, partly based also on what Luke did *not* do.

"1. The key to understanding Acts seems to be in Luke's interest in this movement, orchestrated by the Holy Spirit, of the Gospel from its Jerusalem-based, Judaism-oriented beginnings to its becoming a worldwide, Gentile-predominant phenomenon. On the basis of structure and content alone, any statement of purpose that does not include the Gentile mission and the Holy Spirit's role in that mission will surely have missed the point of the book.

"2. This interest in 'movement' is further substantiated by what Luke does *not* tell us. First, he has no interest in the 'lives,' that is, biographies, of the apostles. James is the only one whose end we know (12:2). Once the movement to the Gentiles gets under way, Peter drops from sight except in chapter 15, where he certifies the Gentile mission. Apart from John, the other apostles are not even mentioned, and Luke's interest in Paul is almost completely in terms of the Gentile mission.

"Second, he has little or no interest in church organization or polity. The Seven in chapter 6 are *not* called deacons, and in any case they soon leave Jerusalem. Luke never tells us why or how it happened that the church in Jerusalem passed from the leadership of Peter and the apostles to James, the brother of Jesus (12:17; 15:13; 21:18); nor does he ever explain how any of the local churches were organized in terms of polity or leadership, except to say that 'elders' were 'appointed' (14:23).

"Third, there is no word about other geographical expansion except in the one direct line from Jerusalem to Rome. There is no mention of Crete (Titus 1:5), Illyricum (Rom. 15:19—modern Yugoslavia), or Pontus, Cappadocia and Bithynia (1 Peter 1:1), not to mention the church's expansion eastward toward Mesopotamia or southward toward Egypt.

"All of this together says that church history *per se* was simply *not* Luke's reason for writing.

"3. Luke's interest also does not seem to be in standardizing things, bringing everything into uniformity. When he records individual conversions, there are usually two elements included: water baptism and the gift of the Spirit. But these can be in reverse order, with or without the laying on of hands, with or without the mention of tongues, and scarcely ever with a specific mention of repentance, even after what Peter says in 2:38–39. Similarly, Luke neither says nor implies that the Gentile churches experienced a communal life similar to that in Jerusalem in 2:42–47 and 4:32–35. Such diversity probably means that no specific example is being set forth as the model Christian experience or church life.

"But is this to say that Luke is not trying to tell us something by these various specific narratives? Not necessarily. The real question is, What was he trying to tell his first readers?"

"4. Nonetheless, we believe that much of Acts is intended by Luke to serve as a model. But the model is not so much in the specifics as in the overall picture. By the very way God has moved him to structure and narrate this history it seems probable that we are to view this triumphant, joyful, forward-moving expansion of the Gospel, empowered by the Holy Spirit and resulting in changed lives and local communities as God's intent for the continuing church. And precisely because this is God's intent for the church, nothing can hinder it, neither Sanhedrin nor synagogue, dissension nor narrow-mindedness, prison nor plot. Luke, therefore, probably intended that the church should be like them, but in the larger sense, rather than by modeling itself on any specific example."

Record any insights from the brief commentary and quotes:

continued



Think Through the Issues

As we stated in the introduction, it is common today for Christians to misunderstand the mission. Luke states it is critical that we accurately understand what happened in the Early Church. At this time, we want to explore the implications of not clearly understanding the unfolding commission and instructions to the disciples. Once we grasp this, we will approach our study of Acts with great anticipation, for it contains many of the keys to the phenomenal success of the first century church.

ISSUE: Accurately understanding the mission

Think Through the Issue Before Discussion:

1. Why do you think Luke thought it was so critical for him to write the book of Acts as a second volume to his gospel?
2. In what sense is Acts catechetical? How does it relate to the teaching of the Apostles, which is found deposited in the letters to the churches in much of the remainder of the New Testament?
3. How important is it to grasp the broad plan that is unfolded in Acts? How might it shape our understanding of our mission?
4. Why is it essential to understand this plan in order to accurately understand the teaching in the New Testament letters?

Record your initial thoughts on the issue before discussion:

Discuss the issue in your small group.

Record your initial thoughts on the issue after discussion:

Apply the Principles

It is now time to respond to what you have studied and discussed. Take your time on this section.

Think Back Through the First Three Steps.

Design an Application for Your Life.

Think through your understanding of the mission. Has it been built upon a careful reflection of the "books" of Acts? Most of us formed our understanding of the mission—the Great Commission, as it is often called—from very simplistic discipleship material, not from pouring over the account of the Early Church, as carefully recorded by Luke. Record your thoughts and commitment to carefully studying the book of Acts.

Record your thoughts on the importance of carefully studying Acts, along with your commitment to do so.